



# Investigate Women's Roles in History— Past and Present

**Grades:** 8-12  
**Time:** 2-3 Class Periods  
**Subjects:** Career Awareness; Language Arts; Social Studies

## Introduction

Have you ever stopped to think about women in history who have made a difference for women today? Or, have you considered learning more about women today who are facing challenges head on to make a difference for the young women who will be following in their footsteps?

In this activity students will learn about women who have contributed significantly to the development of our country and have sought to improve women's rights as well as the rights of others.

## Objectives

- Identify women who have been nontraditional for their time in history.
- Research the lives and accomplishments of three women in history.
- Describe how life choices for women today have changed from those of our ancestors.

As part of this activity, emphasize the varied aspects of women's work roles and give students an opportunity to discuss the types of work their grandmothers, great grandmothers, aunts, and sisters chose. Help students understand the different meanings that work has for different people and understand how work needs to be valued in order to be satisfying.

## Strategies

- Brainstorm a list of famous women of accomplishment, and write their names on the board. (See sample list of women in history included in this activity.)
- Identify what each woman is known for and describe some of the risks these women faced. Point out that women in the past and present have done nontraditional work.
- Research famous women on the Internet to learn more about their lives and accomplishments. Have each student pick three they would like to write about, and have them share what they learned in class.
- Discuss trends in women's accomplishments and occupations. Include the similarities and differences between women's roles and men's roles.
- Have students interview an older female relative or neighbor, then discuss the types of work women did to survive in the 1800's and 1900's. Follow up with a discussion on the variety of career choices and opportunities young women have today.
- Discuss how governmental needs, economic conditions and social pressures have affected women's access to nontraditional jobs, and compare past conditions with similar conditions today.
- Describe sex-role stereotypes that were promoted by the media in the past (print ads, commercials, television programs, movies), and have students compare and contrast how the media portrays women today.

### **Suggested Interview Questions**

1. What was a typical day for you as a child?
2. What chores were you expected to do to contribute to the family?
3. What kinds of games did you play?
4. What education did you receive?
5. What was your father's attitude about women and the type of work they should do?
6. What was your mother's attitude about the type of work women should do? What type of work did she do?
7. What type of work did you do?
8. What work (career) would you have liked to pursue? And, what changes, if any would you have made to your life?
9. What have you enjoyed most in your life?
10. Do you think women today have equal rights and opportunities?

### Sample List of Women in History

- Nancy Hart (1735-1830) - Patriot who captured a group of Tories
- Mary Eathenne Goddard (1738-1816) - Printed copies of the Declaration of Independence
- Sybil Ludington (1762-1839) - Rode horseback to warn of a British attack on Danbury, Connecticut
- Abigail Adams (1722-1818) - First lady and voluminous correspondent who advocated for protection of women in the new American Constitution
- Elizabeth Freeman/"Mum Bet" (1732-1829) - A slave in Massachusetts, she was the first black to sue for freedom and win
- Mercy Otis Warren (1728-1814) - Playwright, historian and confidant of many of the founding fathers
- Martha Washington (1731-1802) - First Lady. Model for the first ladies who followed her.
- Harriet Tubman (1820-1913) - Conductor on the Underground Railroad; spy and scout during the Civil War
- Harriet Beecher Stowe (1811-1911) - Abolitionist and author of the influential novel Uncle Tom's Cabin
- Frances Ellen Watkins Harper (1825-1911) - Abolitionist lecturer, anti-slavery novelist and poet
- Clara Barton (1821-1912) - Civil War nurse; Founder of the American Red Cross
- Sojourner Truth (1775-1883) - Orator against slavery and for women's rights
- Lucy Stone (1818-1893) - Abolitionist and women's rights activist
- Mary Ellen "Mammy" Pleasant (1814-1904) - Abolitionist, entrepreneur, sued to integrate public transportation in San Francisco.
- Susan B. Anthony (1812-1906) & Elizabeth C. Stanton (1815-1902) - Abolitionists and women's rights activists. Organizers of nationwide anti-slavery petition campaign during the Civil War
- Coretta Scott King (b. 1939) - Co-founder of National Black Leadership Forum
- Eleanor Smeal (b. 1939) - Women's rights activist and president of the Feminist Majority Foundation
- Mary Harns "Mother" Jones (1830-1930) - Labor organizer
- Jesse Lopez De La Cruz (b. 1919) - First woman to organize farm workers in the fields for the United Farm Workers
- Jane Addams (1860-1935) - Founder of the Hull House in Chicago; Winner of the Nobel Peace Prize
- Ida B. Wells Barnett (1862-1931) Journalist and anti-lynching activist
- Carrie Chapman Catt (1859-1947) - Suffragist and political strategist; President of the National American Woman Suffrage Association
- Alice Paul (1885-1977) - Suffragist; Founder of National Woman's Party; Author of the first Equal Rights Amendment in 1923.
- Dorothy Day (1897-1980) - Co-founder of Catholic Worker Movement advocating for the poor and for all forms of social justice
- Gertrude Bonnin "Zitkala-sa" (1875-1938) - American Indian Rights activist and reformer; Author who recorded Indian tribal legends
- Juliette Gordon Low (1860-1927) - Founder of the Girl Scouts of America
- Senator Margaret Chase Smith (1897-1995) - Republican Senator and U.S. representative

from Maine. The only woman to serve in both houses of Congress. Smith was the first Senator to challenge Sen. Joseph McCarthy in his Communist "witch hunts.",

- Shirley Chisholm (b. 1924) - First black Congresswoman; First black woman to run for U.S. Presidency
- Sally K Ride (b. 1951) - First American woman astronaut in space on board the Challenger's second orbital mission in 1983
- Bessie Coleman (1893-1926) - First licensed black woman aviator in the United States
- Grace Hopper (1906-1992) - Navy Real Admiral and "mother of computer programming" who developed COBOL, the first used-friendly software language
- Maggie Kuhn (1905-1995) - Founder of Gray Panthers and an activist for the rights of elders
- Barbara Jordan (1936-1996) - U.S. Representative and lawyer; First black woman in the Texas state legislature; Commanding orator who was the first woman ever to address the Democratic National Convention in 1976
- Alicia Dickerson Montemayor (1902-1989) - Community organizer, Second vice president general of the League of United Latin American Citizens
- Nannie Helen Burroughs (1879-1961) - Educator, activist and orator; Co-founder of the Women's Auxiliary of the National Baptist Convention in 1900; Founded National Training School for Woman and Girls in 1909
- Alice Fong Yu (b. 1905) - First Chinese-American teacher in San Francisco; Co-founded the service-oriented Square and Circle Club for Chinese-American Women in San Francisco
- Dr. Mae Jemison (b. 1957) - Physician; First African-American woman astronaut in space in 1992
- Dr. Gerda Lerner (b. 1920) - Author and historian of American women
- Dr. Shirley Jackson (b. 1947) - Nuclear physicist; Chair of the Nuclear Regulatory Commission
- Hillary Rodham Clinton (b. 1947) - First lady; Attorney; Senator from New York
- Patsy Mink (b. 1921) - Congresswoman from Hawaii; First Asian-American Congresswoman; Author of Title XI legislation requiring equal access to education for women and girls
- Judith Baca (b. 1946) - Muralist whose work has involved teenagers in life and culture of Los Angeles; Professor, Community Leader
- Evelyn Cisneros (b. 1958)- Principle dancer of the San Francisco Ballet

Source: *Orientation to Nontraditional Occupations for Women*, Ohio Department of Education.